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MYKONOS

by

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B.A. Denison University, 1992

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for the degree of

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Approved by:



Chairman of Thesis Committee



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I

THE SILVER BOX

How the businessman loved his daughter. He had her bedroom painted the most wonderful pink. He brightened her neck and fingers with jewelry. She was schooled in etiquette and urbanity from the greatest English masters. She was read only the best literature, philosophy, and science. Equestrianism was taught on Saturdays, Religion on Sundays, and accounting on Sunday nights.

But she was unhappy. When she told her father she wanted friends he had a topiary of schoolgirls cut. When she wanted a pet he bought a zebra. When she wanted fresh air he took her for golfcart rides at the country club.

One day, while she was sulking in the topiary, she noticed a handsome boy smiling at her from the front gate. She was so alarmed she ran inside the mansion.

He stood by the gate for days, always smiling. She watched him pace comically throughout the nights. She watched him laugh during thunderstorms. She watched him giggle at the sun. Finally, she was curious enough to meet him.

"You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen," he said to her. "I have admired you for days, yet never once have you smiled. Would you smile for me?"

"I have been watching you," she said, "and you are always smiling. Is the world that funny? Do you have so much vacant time that a joke echoes in your ears?"

"Love is humor to me," he said. "My dreams are the greatest comedies, and you are the perfect comedienne. The audience applauds for your love. How will you answer them?"

"I will smile," she said.

The girl never seemed happier. She ran through the gardens laughing. She told wild, punchlineless jokes to the chauffeurs and maids. She had daisies for breakfast and dandelions for dinner. She preferred to sleep out on the wide lawns. She held discussions with the owls, stars, and moon.

At first, her father took pleasure in his daughter's new eccentricities, thinking them a curious yet forgivable adolescent phase. However, after she no longer desired the indoors at all; after she was caught passionately stroking the topiary figures; after he noticed a young boy hiding in a tree, smiling at his smiling daughter, he became concerned.

The neighbors began to talk. Domestic animals disappeared, then reappeared wearing garlands. Incantations were heard addressed to the night sky. There was music where there had never been music: in the forest, in the hedgerows, by the trout ponds, on the fairways and greens.

When a naked boy and girl were seen riding a zebra across the polo fields he knew he had to do something.

One morning as the sun licked its early light over long fingers of mist, he found his daughter lying with her lover underneath an ancient tree. While she slept, he took her smile and locked it in a silver box.

3.

When the girl awoke she was terrified to find herself lying in the arms of a boy. He seemed strangely familiar. Though he was handsome, his good looks seemed gaudy and cheap. She wept because her hair was dirty, because there was mud under her fingernails, because she was naked, and because she felt violated.

She kicked the sleeping boy, and screamed, "Monster! I don't know who you are or why I'm here. Your smile is hideous!"

The boy smiled as his lover ran across the glittering dewfield towards home.

Every night, after the businessman reads his papers, after all the servants retire and his daughter is safely asleep, he walks down long steps to the cellar. He unlocks a secret door behind a cask of very fine Merlot. By torchlight he follows a dank, narrow passage that opens into a massive chamber. There, among overflowing chests of gold, buckets of gemstones, stacks of platinum coins, and famous paintings long thought to be casualties of the terrible wars, is a small silver box on an antique table.

He holds the box in his hands, rubbing the smooth sides. Finally, with a tiny key he opens it. Then, in front of a huge cheval glass, he puts his daughter's smile over his lips.

He wonders, out of all the faces he makes in the mirror, if his favorite is truly a smiling boy.

II

MYKONOS

J'ai tendu des cordes de clocher à clocher; des
guirlandes de fenêtre à fenêtre; des chaînes d'or
d'étoile à étoile, et je danse.
-Arthur Rimbaud

It is a contradiction of lust, a certitude of lies.
-Britt E. Pei

1.

I am the rich boy, golden stuffing kept in crystal jars. I am white skin, shard of bone, nub of lung. Here are my fingerprints' display. It shows a knot in the long twine of ecstasy. Here is a basket of teeth milky as moonstones. My eyes are in this jewel box among other squinty gems. I have wrapped my tongue in lace to enhance this spectacle of bits: the lovely, preserved me.

2.
(Hydra)

Branches of this peach tree are corded together by a vine's thick tangle of leaves, tendrils, webs, nests, and yellow jacket crawl. It's a mess of tumbling bugs that, to the burst and bursting peaches, tumble up. I sit poolside and listen to the soft feast of wings on sunsplit fruit. Here, the summer weather is always perfect. White boats jostle for space in the harbor. Water flashes in sun as I swim.

3.

She says my name is the difference between hiss and hum. I tell her I only follow numbers and my own intuition. The wasp nest is peeled. The queen writhes. Her jaws pinch steely flakes of leafmeal. Drones flicker their wings between my lover's fingers. Though they dart over the weave of veins in her wrist I won't tell her the meaning of the story, the one where balloonists count lights over Wyoming.

4.

The prairie laps against the horizon. Seven does hoof for food in the arroyo's sand. I watch the moonrise while weaving a crib from grass. My lover bundles her hair. She won't let me touch her. I cannot caress with these calloused hands; I whittled from hemlock the bedframe she lies on. She gives the nodding thumb in her womb a name, and reminds me all I have to do is not sleep.

5.
(Promenade)

I wear my blackest suit and shoes of slick leather.
The cressets blaze. Torchlights flicker over the brass
buttons of my coat. The mosaics on the walls are the
sliding shadows of dancers. The dark hall's glittering
belly spills open as I seep past sarabands of lovers
pressing close together, close as I am with this
woman, hand in hand, our bodies twining within the
quick braids of music.

6.

I tune my guitar. Snow gathers between the frets. In this cold the strings won't hold the notes. I strum chords for the peacocks pecking at salt on the road's berm. Under the streetlights their feathers shine with snowmelt. A woman requests a love song without words. She wants her boyfriend to know she's got no regrets about leaving him. "I let him keep my clock," she says. "I go to bed when everyone goes to work."

7.
(The Sagacious Moth)

I come nightly to this park bench to listen. The moth taps against the streetlight above me. Its Morse is clear. *Avoid women with curlicues; their passion tumbles out in their hair. Avoid great literature; it will preoccupy you. Be romantic only when it's convenient. Keep exact time; you don't know when you'll be asked for it. Beware of liars; you can always tell a true moth by the sound advice it gives.*

8.
(Dog)

He was so proud of his sunflower garden: all those blond faces addressing the sun. To protect them, he built a fence. *How beautiful those bright heads look now*, he thought, admiring his work. Then he heard a dog pawing somewhere among the rows. He might have torn down the fence, shot the dog. Instead, he sat on his porch, and watched his flowers topple into a ruin of stalks, glad to have accomplished something new.

9.
(The Mattress Painter)

Eventually, all out-worn mattresses are brought to him. He paints lovers on them. Here, a spring pokes through a young man's arm reaching for his bride. Here, two figures are so twined no one can tell who's who. Here, a woman is exquisitely bound in ropes. And here, two men engage in wild taboos. Every night, he walks among the stacks of bodies on bodies, choosing an expression for his bed.

10.
(The Teacher)

There was a teacher who was not allowed to teach.
Officials called his speech wry, his lessons arcane.
Had he a diploma they would have taken it away.
Two men claimed his notes for the government. His
pens were displayed to terrify children. Named an
insurgent, a pornographer, a leech, he was hated
famously. Studentless, he knew himself: joke butt
and pervert, head full of books.

11.

He first fell as an acrobat off the highwire. The audience applauded when he popped his limbs back into place, but he amazed himself most. *What next*, he thought. Soon, he was jumping from small buildings. Then tall. His reflection in skyscraper glass and the inevitable pavement satisfied him only briefly. Wanting more, he stood on a plane's wing while, far below, the sea unrolled its net of waves.

12.
(The Chime Maker)

The forest shakes with rain. Leaves flicker while moss fattens. Scatters of ribs green among ferns. A salamander squirms brightly over a musket barrel's rust. Skulls jostle in my basket. I collect the dead and assemble skeletons. Tied together with string they fidget in the wind. I hang one where each soldier fell. When the trees rustle I listen for the knock of bones, the sound of wood against wood.

13.
(Monongahela)

I cup my ears to a train's long catarrhous whine. The evening is warm and wet, bitter with the rot of fermenting sumac. Across the tracks a spring stutters out of sandstone cliffs. I follow strings of lights down through cobblestone streets, past the bloodshot eye of a blast furnace. A pipe juts from the fine silt of the riverbed. Its mouth is capped shut. I pry the fat plug free. The spout spits lungfuls of rust.

There is a hint of vinegar in the air. Along the river the fires still burn. Children chase glass bits glittering in the mud while we offer valuables to the mayor. One man says, "My daughter is a virgin--her lack of breasts is proof." I present a regimen of toy soldiers forged from engine metal. We sway in prayer, glad to be neighbors. As we douse our torches, carp flap up to the shore for chocolates.

15.
(Benedicta & The Methodical Worm)

When she rubs her toes on the lawn their pink heads pop from the soil. "What have you eaten today," she asks them. "A sad boy's newly buried gerbil," one replies. "A delicious slice of rust," says another. "I found a cemetery so vast," boasts one, "I've been under there a year, still I'm chewing through the A's." "Those who live in caves of food," Benedicta says, "cannot appreciate the sun."

16.
(The Neologist)

I hear water everywhere. The walls bulge with shaking pipes. The ceiling leaks onto my collection of words I don't know what to do with. Ruined are yesterday's catalogues of quiet and bright colors. I can barely outwrite the decomposition. Still, I have dictionaries to fill. "Why create on a desk of puddles where all's written rots?" poets ask. "Everywhy," I respond, "Everywhy."

17.
(The Blue Man & The Green Man)

The blue man is proud to show his skin, how his chest is more blue than his feet, but less blue than his face. He tells everyone about eminent blue men, and quotes them. The green man argues with the blue man. He lives his life as a secret, and thinks the less one has to remember the better. Oppressed by others, the two bicker, exclaiming "The sorrow of it all," though neither knows who coined that phrase.

18.

This is where the great city stood. Now, there is nothing, only mounds of sand in a landscape of sand. I have never found bricks, bones, or pottery shards, though I know they loved their masons and artists. Our God was one of their many Gods. They must have buried their dead. I keep a jar of this sand in my museum. Every year people come from distant countries to run their hands through the brilliant grains.

19.
(The Cult)

The same leaflet appears on our doorstep every morning. Finally, they come in person to tell us about the oracle's skull, how, when one looks into its sockets one can see the future. "Books will become obsolete," they say. "Criminals will cower in dark alleys, their crimes foreknown everywhere. Full of knowledge, you will laugh at your neighbors, who have been told all about the skull but don't care."

20.
(The Transvestite)

I love God. I perform for him. See my long nails well painted red, my lips full, my silks slick and black over my legs, my dress a delicate flow my body tucks into as any woman's body tucks into lovemaking. My aphrodisiac is her own passionate form, completely female in her lover's hands, so ecstatic she shows herself to him as I show myself to this mirror.

21.

In pubdark the pool tables shine like little ponds.
Balls snap and skitter across the bright billiard blue. I
chalk-up to cue each solid to a pocket. Tonight the
drinks are free, and Miss Minnesota 1964 makes the
bar a catwalk to finger herself upon. Her dance is
green under the beerlights' neon. Soon, even the
drunks stop watching. I take careful aim but the
eightball won't drop.

22.

There are no noon bells today. Instead, a man and woman stand atop the town hall. They, too, have the plague. Already their bones slip out from under their skin. They tell the gathering crowd there can be no love without the body. He plays a flute that sounds sighs. She blows through her arm's new hollow. "I have a pocketful of want," he says to great applause. "See how my lover's smile opens into her throat."

23.
(The Intern)

I have lost all sympathy. Patients are wheeled in brown as potatoes. I needle their soft bodies, and watch bright fluids slicker down tubes, into their veins. I tell them doctors are professionals of pain, and I only an apprentice, my studies far from complete. They can't hear me. Medication has made them deaf. When I move my lips they smile, each mouth opening like a wound I can't stitch shut.

24.
(Moonman)

You have stranded me in this milky place of plastic moons, each drifting to a bump, nudge, tangle of wire. The moon machine hums. Every cog-wheel spins a constellation. I cheer the clash of orbits, the smack of stars. The others here construct angles around nests of numbers. Their pockets spill data. Their protectors reflect the sun as they sketch figures in the white sand, happy as sticky lovers.

25.
(Mice)

He lived in the woods with a woman he loved. His cabin was very peaceful except for mice. All day he could hear them eating in the walls. At night, the sounds loudened to frenzy. He set traps; the bait disappeared. He set poison; it vanished without effect. Eventually, the forest withered away, the woman left for quieter places, and he took the teething of mice for silence.

26.
(Nursery)

It's not mocking this home and nursery, but close.
Your dog yaps and plays, threatening our drinks
with its quick tail. The room trembles to the baby's
milktime bawl. I have two plaster faces, once
faithfully wall-hung, now stacked one in the other in
an attic drawer. I have a silver earring and a few
clothes shoeboxed somewhere. Toys lilt bright,
jingling over your baby's crib while around teeth and
tongue your dog grins.

I sleep in a room full with people I've just met. There's a patter of tongues, but it is too dark. I can't see who's kissing. A man presses my head to his thigh. "This will become our secret," he says tightening the ribbon around my neck. I ask if he knows about the police I've let into the cellar. "No one will talk," he says. He thumbs my lips. I open my mouth wide as a cup.

28.
(The Devil Of Central Park)

A sparrow says, "I am the Devil of Want, and you have been watching that man for some time now." "Oh, the things I could do to him if only I wanted," the woman replies, "The day is too beautiful for such thoughts." Suddenly, the city leers at her with a thousand man-faces, one in every window. "This might terrify some women," she says, "but the grass is so green, the sun so bright even the sidewalks shine, and all those other sparrows look just like you."

"Irony:" she says, "Clark camped here without Lewis." She pulls knots of knapweed over the greened brass plaque. The air glitters with the crazy pace of horseflies. She unzips her jeans. I see the bruise on her thigh, a purple coil around which the skin has turned black. "He kisses me with his fists," she says, "I've no choice--I know a place under an ancient tree. There, I'll fill my womb with soil before going back to him."

30.
(The Ascetic)

Below my ribs I carved out a drawer that can be opened only with a kiss. There, I keep a gymnasium of phalloi, yet I refuse all kissing. Once, I danced in dark ballrooms where names were formalities and silks swept across the floors in breathy dialogues. Now, my lovers have become confessional lists. Their fingers still patter over my chest, but I'm unwanting so long as my God has eyes.

The mosque domes to a palimpsest of Byzantine angels and Ottoman script. Peeled gilding reveals crosses, even a mosaic of Christ somewhere, though our tour-guide in translation tells us not where. From the minarets, loudspeakers sputter and squeal between prayers to Allah. Voices of muezzins intricately cover the city and us. Veiled, we walk the mosque rugs shoeless (and Christian, barely).

Every morning an old woman walks to the sea. She bundles her clothes and walk out beyond the shoal to swim. One morning, down in a blue depth she knows, by familiar rocks, a nude body sways slow, ankle-tied and cinderblock drowned. The eyes: salt-dulled, open. The skin: a flamboyant white clarity. She tells a boatman who says, "Tell no one. The body will unravel like newspaper in the sea."

When the sun descended into Hydra the townspeople cursed the brilliance that steamed their wells dry. Everyone fled into the cool Aegean. "Why are you doing this to us?" they asked. The sun, ashamed, replied, "From my height I saw the whole world. No one was happier. I only wanted to warm you more." "Please keep your distance," the people said, "We will paint our homes white to honor you. Every wall will be shadeless as noon."

34.
(Cithaeron)

How he'd bore them with the same song of love lost.
So they plucked off his limbs, and swallowed him
with wine. Some nursed wild dogs, some sharpened
their teeth against stones, some tore out their hair to
impress the skin-bright moon. All danced to furious
music, orgy-blind. His head was hung from a post.
But he could not die. Bodiless, he continued his
song, singing sorrow to a madness that could hear
only joy.

35.
(Scuba)

It's all sun and lambent blue roll of an ocean
puckering against the diveboat's hull. Then, the chill
of warm water on warmer skin, the pale furrows of
seabottom sand raveling out to grayblue distances,
and thick throaty wet breathing filling my ears.
Holding my sprout of tubes, I sink as one peacefully
drowning. Far above, the surface crackles with light.
Here, I'm anchor heavy, scuttled mute.

36.
(Mykonos)

People and wind: shadows blow over the flagstones.
Against the seawall waves whitecap and spray. No
one will take us to Delos. The boatmen say the wind
will punch fists through their rigging. One man says,
“The wind is nervous earfuls of a crazy ocean gone
crazier. Now there’s no peaceful place to put bones.”
We want to know more, if we heard right, but he’s
pulled the sea over his head and rocked himself to
sleep.